

Sermon for morning Trinity 16 2020

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3.21

Sometimes we can forget just how powerful and open our God can be. Whenever we think of God, whenever we begin to pray, whenever we ponder the meaning of our lives, God is present with us. This means that it is appropriate we accept that God is present both with and within us.

St Paul prays that we may know the breadth, length and height and depth of the love of God and indeed, the love of Christ. We can think of Jesus on the cross with that cross pointing up to heaven, pointing down to earth, and with Jesus arms outstretched and willing to embrace the breadth and length of humanity. That love is for princes and paupers. There is no distinction.

It is for us to pursue our understanding of God through prayer, worship, and scripture. We are to rise above rules and regulations, expectations, and prejudice. Our whole life is to be an exercise in coming closer to God. It is to endeavour to imitate Christ and our life is to be so focussed on God that we can recognise silly rules and regulations of human origin and to remain the servant of God. As Paul says it, *“That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith as you are rooted and grounded in Love”*.

There can be no doubt that this is something for which we are to strive. Our faith is not a static thing. The more we seek to be at one with God the deeper our faith will grow. There is also the reality of our faith ebbing and flowing in intensity. Sometimes God seems to be very close and at other times, not so close. God never changes, but we do. There is the discipline of prayer and study of the bible, but there are very few rules and regulations. These rules and regulations are frequently the intrusion of human expectation rather than God’s desire.

The downside of seeking to place rules and regulations around our faith is highlighted by Jesus in the gospel today. The Jews understand themselves to be the chosen race. God loves only them. This is the Jews of Jesus time of course. They have been anointed and adopted by God and they belong to God. God is their Father and they are his children. Somehow, they have become confused as to what this means.

In the lead up to the Gospel today we have the startling scene of Jesus taking a whip to the stall holders in the temple and in a fury driving them out. He overturns tables and strikes fear into the hearts of all who witness this. This is not a response that we would expect to see from the Messiah, the one who comes in peace and wishes only for all people to be reconciled to God. His accusation is very enlightening. Jesus accused them of having turned the house of prayer into a den of thieves. They had used the faith for financial gain.

It is little wonder that the Pharisees ask him by what authority he does all that he does. Not only the whip in the temple, but with what authority does he heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead.

It is interesting that Jesus does not answer their question directly. In the first instance his response is to ask them a question. John the Baptist is the forerunner of Jesus. He is the one who has come to call the people to repentance in preparation for the arrival of the Messiah. His role is a very important and influential one. John the Baptist literally introduces the Son of God, the Messiah, to the Jews; he introduces Jesus to the world.

Jesus asks the pharisees whether John was performing a ministry for God, or for humanity. Was the baptism he offered from God or was it some made up human hoax. It is a brilliant question. If they say that John's baptism is from God, Jesus will ask them why they refused to be baptised by John, and why they refuse to believe all that Jesus says and teaches. If they say the baptism is of human construct, then the crowds who already understand that John is a prophet of God will attack them. So, they give this pitiful answer, "We do not know."

Jesus follows this up with the parable concerning two sons, one was obedient and the other was not. We are to understand that the father in this parable is God. God is the Father. The Sons who are sent into the field are either the Jews, or the Gentiles.

The son who said he would go and did not go is in fact the Jewish community. God has indeed chosen them. They are his children who have been given the task of making God known. They are the ones first chosen to be a people of faith, compassion, and love. Their role is to work in the vineyard of life and to gather all people to God. In the context of this parable they have failed. More than this, they were disobedient before God. "yes, we will go and do as you have asked." But they did not go. They have not done as God has requested. Instead they have created a rule book. Obey the human rules constructed by us or be condemned. That is the bottom line of the faith at the time of Jesus ministry. People are to obey human rules and regulations regarding faith in God or stand condemned by God. the argument is illogical and fundamentally wrong.

The second son can be seen to be the gentiles and perhaps even some members of the Jewish faith. These are the people who live by faith and obey the divine rather than the rules made up by man. Initially reluctant, but then willing to embrace the faith and to encourage other people to believe. Not with rules and regulations, but with love and compassion. These are the people who are obeying the wishes of God. that wish is that all people come to the faith through their own conviction and belief.

It must have been very confronting for the pharisees to be told that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter heaven before them. The reasoning being that these people who were condemned by society had turned to Jesus, had believed in Jesus, and had repented of sin and were reconciled with God. The Pharisees on the other hand had set up their own empire and were dictating who could belong and who would be rejected. For all intents and purposes their faith, at that time in history, was opposing the instruction of God.

This is the mindset with which Paul is confronted. His teaching is not confined by a set of rules, rather he is promoting a faith which is internal to the person. He teaches that Christ is within the person and that God is always with the person. This is what he says, "I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that God may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in Love.

These are not man made rules. The prayer is such that we are free to live our faith. And living our faith is to strive to imitate our Lord Jesus in all that we do. In short, we are not to dictate rules and regulations for some presumed salvation by right, we are to be vehicles of divine love and compassion. With the promise of salvation through faith in God.